



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Using Formative Assessments with English Learners

Scott Baker, Ph.D. • April 2007

**Topic:** Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners

**Practice:** Screen and Monitor Progress

### Highlights (short version)

- Formative assessment is imperative in the early grades to help monitor students' growth.
- Formative assessments may be given up to three times a year for all students in grades K-3, and more frequently for those further behind.
- Assessments used with native English learners may be used with English language learners to determine a student's acquisition of skills.
- Oral language proficiency is not a strong predictor of later reading success for English language learners.
- Oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension skills need to be simultaneously taught to English language learners before they move into second and third grades, where the text becomes more difficult.
- Assessment of English language learners' early reading skills in English should occur even if their skills are not fully developed.

### Highlights (extended version)

- Differences between formative and summative assessments
- Benefits of formative assessments.
- Assessments used with native English learners may be used with English language learners to determine a student's acquisition of skills.

- Getting a good, early start with reading skills correlates to children performing well on 3rd grade standardized assessments.
- Reading skills to assess
- Relationship of oral proficiency and reading
- Preparing English learners for formative assessment
- Considerations in developing a comprehensive assessment system

### About the Interviewee

Dr. Baker is the director of Pacific Institutes for Research. He received his Ph.D. in school psychology in 1993. Since then he has pursued a full-time research career at Eugene Research Institute and the University of Oregon. His research interests include students with learning disabilities, instruction and assessment with English learners, and translating research to practice. Baker is currently the principle investigator on three research projects funded by OSEP, and he just completed a project synthesizing the knowledge base on effective instruction for English learners with disabilities. The findings will be published in a book on research syntheses in special education. He also recently completed a chapter for the *Handbook of Research on Teaching, 4th Edition*, and he writes frequently in journals such as *School Psychology Review*, *Exceptional Children*, and *Learning Disabilities Quarterly*.

### Full Transcript (short version)

I'm the director of the Pacific Institutes for Research in Eugene and also a research associate at the University of Oregon.

Prior to grade three, it's very good practice for schools to gather information, to collect formative assessment information on how well their children are learning how to read. We know that if kids don't have a strong foundation in reading skills in the early grades—by grades two or three, some people even say grade one—it's going to be much harder to help kids reach grade-level reading performance if they are starting later in grades three or four to really help kids catch up.

Schools can provide effective services to kids if they know how well kids are learning the basics in the early grades. So, formative assessments can be used in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade to see how well children are making progress.

Generally, formative assessments are provided up to three times per year with all children. They might do this at the beginning of the year, the middle of the year, and then again at the end of the year. The further behind kids are, the general idea is, the more frequently they should be provided with the formative assessment to closely monitor their progress to closely see that they *are* learning the phonological structure of the language, for example, or they *are* learning how to decode really accurately, or they *are* learning how to develop their reading fluency skills.

What we're arguing, and what I think is really true, both in terms of research studies and also in

terms of practices that I've seen in buildings where they are providing effective instruction to English language learners, is that the same kinds of assessments that are used to determine how well non-English language learners, or native English speakers, for example, are learning to read in English can be used with English language learners to see how well they're learning how to read. How well they are learning phonological awareness skills, how well they are learning how to decode fluently, and how well they are learning how to read fluently, by the middle of first grade, into second grade, and third grade. If kids, both English language learners and non-English language learners, get a good start in schools in those early grades, learning those foundational skills, they are much more likely to do well on the high-stakes assessments that are administered beginning in grade three and beyond.

Oral language proficiency is not a good indicator of how much progress kids are going to make learning how to read in foundational areas. It doesn't provide information about the kinds of growth kids can make in phonological awareness. It doesn't provide good information about the kinds of growth kids can make in learning how to decode. Those are two critical areas where oral language proficiency can't really be used to provide a good index of how much growth kids are going to make. So, even though their oral language proficiency skills may be low, English language learners, when provided with good, strong reading instruction, can make as much growth as other kids. In some cases—and there are research studies that have shown this—they can make *more* growth than native English speakers in these areas.

Now, in relation to higher level areas, like reading comprehension and vocabulary, it's critical that at the same time we're teaching English language learners the phonological structure of language or how to decode in English, for example, we're also building their oral language skills and their vocabulary skills. After the middle of about second grade, sometimes earlier, the text that kids are expected to read becomes more challenging, and they are going to need oral language skills, comprehension skills, and vocabulary skills to really understand text. But, in terms of developing foundational skills in phonemic awareness and decoding, for example, and to some extent, in reading fluency as well, oral language proficiency does not provide a strong predictor of which kids are going to benefit.

So, even though English language learners may have low oral language skills in English, they still should be assessed with these formative assessments to tell educators how much they know about phonological awareness or how strong their decoding skills are. They can use this information, then, to provide more intense instruction for kids who really need it, both English language learners and non-English language learners.

### Full Transcript (extended version)

I'm the director of Pacific Institutes for Research in Eugene and also a research associate at the University of Oregon.

I think the best way to understand formative assessments is to contrast them with summative assessments. Most people know summative assessments, even though they may have not really heard that term used when a test is described. But, a summative assessment is the kind of test that's given

at the end of an academic year, for example, to measure reading performance or math performance or some other academic area. Formative assessments on the other hand are given typically at the beginning of the year and then perhaps throughout the year, maybe two or three additional times. And the purpose of formative assessments is to plan and guide instruction.

Prior to grade three, it's very good practice for schools to gather information to collect formative assessment information on how well their children are learning how to read. We know that if kids don't have a strong foundation in reading skills in the early grades, by grades two or three, some people even say grade one, it's going to be much harder to help kids reach grade-level reading performance if they're starting later in grades three and four to really help kids catch up. Schools can provide effective services to kids if they know how well kids are learning the basics in the early grades. So, formative assessments can be used in kindergarten, first, and second grade to see how well children are making progress.

Now, notice, I've talked about children at this point. I haven't talked about English language learners and non-English language learners. What we're arguing and what I think is really true both in terms of research studies—but also in terms of practices that I've seen in buildings where they're providing effective instruction to English language learners—is that the same kinds of assessments that are used to determine how well non-English language learners, or native English speakers, for example, are learning to read in English can be used with English language learners to see how well they're learning how to read, how well they're learning phonological awareness skills, how well they're learning how to decode fluently, and how well they're learning how to read fluently by the middle of first grade into second grade and third grade. If kids, both English language learners and non-English language learners, get a good start in schools in those early grades learning those foundational skills, they're much more likely to do well on the high-stakes assessments that are administered beginning in grade three and beyond.

The reading skills that are really critical to assess for English language learners and non-English language learners are very similar. Both the National Reading Panel and the National Literacy Panel have done exhaustive studies of the kinds of areas of reading development that kids should be assessed in and kids should learn. And for both English language learners and non-English language learners, the really critical areas have to do with phonological awareness. So that's the ability kids have to hear the sounds in words. Decoding is the ability to read words, either words or non-words, that use letters to represent those sounds that they hear in terms of phonological awareness, and they have to be able to do this fluently. This is reading fluency. These are three skills that both English language learners and non-English-language learners have to develop to high degrees of proficiency if they're going to comprehend what they're reading.

Reading comprehension is the critical outcome in early reading development. It's what will enable kids to understand content in late elementary school and beyond; it's what will enable kids to really digest subject area knowledge in science, in history, and in reading. As textbooks become more complex as children get older—expository text, narrative text—it's really critical that reading comprehension skills are strongly developed in kids.

Oral language proficiency is not a good indicator of how much progress kids are going to make learning how to read and foundational areas. It doesn't provide information about the kinds of growth kids can make in phonological awareness. It doesn't provide good information about the kinds of growth kids can make in learning how to decode. Those are two critical areas where oral language proficiency can't really be used to provide a good index of how much growth kids are going to make. So even though their oral language proficiency skills may be low, English language learners, when they are provided with good, strong reading instruction, can make as much growth as other kids. In some cases—and there are research studies that have shown this—they can make more growth than native English speakers in these areas.

Now, in relation to higher-level areas like reading comprehension and vocabulary, it's critical that, at the same time, we're teaching English language learners the phonological structure of language or how to decode in English, for example. We're also building their oral language skills and their vocabulary skills, because after about the middle of second grade, sometimes earlier, the text that kids are expected to read becomes more challenging, and they're going to need oral language skills and comprehension skills and vocabulary skills to really understand text. But in terms of developing foundational skills and phonemic awareness and decoding, for example, and to some extent in reading fluency as well, oral language proficiency does not provide a strong predictor of which kids are going to benefit. So even though English language learners may have low oral language skills in English, they still should be assessed with these formative assessments to tell educators how much they know about phonological awareness or how strong their decoding skills are. They can use this information then to provide more intense instruction for kids who really need it, both English language learners and non-English language learners.

Now, the test usually is conducted in English if they're assessing how well kids are learning how to read in English. And so the words that they'll have to read or the sounds perhaps in words that they'll have to try to identify will be English words and English sounds. But the examiner may be able to explain the directions to the child in his or her native language, and if that's the case, that's a very good thing to do. The goal is to make sure that the child really understands the task and is able to engage in the task to the best of his or her ability.

In other cases, the examiner may be able to gather some information about the child's knowledge of phonological awareness, for example, in his or her native language. Phonological awareness is a skill that transfers relatively easily, so that even though a child may not know the meaning of the English word that's being assessed in the examination, if they have phonological awareness skills and they understand the nature of the task—what it is the examiner is asking the child to do—that child should be able to identify the sounds, for example, that exist in an English word, just like they're able to identify the sounds in their native language. It's a skill that transfers relatively easily.

Alphabetic knowledge or phonics knowledge is not a skill that transfers without pretty strong, explicit instruction for children. So, even though a Spanish-speaking student, for example, may have strong decoding skills or reading fluency skills in his or her native language, those skills in the native language will not necessarily transfer to English, because the way English words are read are different in many cases from the way Spanish words are read.

The alphabetic principle is similar, in other words. Both Spanish and English are alphabetic languages, so the same kinds of rules that apply for reading words in Spanish apply for reading words in English. But, if a child is a very good decoder, for example, in Spanish and hasn't developed that skill yet in English, an English decoding skill will show that that child is having trouble decoding words in English. Now if the examiner and the other educators that are working with that child know that the child possesses strong decoding skills in his or her native language, they'll be able to use that information to provide instruction in English that may help the child make more progress once instruction and learning how to decode is provided in English. But it's true that if a child does not do well on a test of decoding, for example in English, that test should be registering that the child is not able to decode those words, rather than the child doesn't understand the directions. So the directions might be provided in a language that child understands best. In some cases, that may be the native language; in some cases, that may be in English. But, we really want the child to know what the task is and then apply the knowledge they have to do the task successfully. If they are not able to do the task successfully, what that means is that some type of additional instruction or more intense instruction should be provided so that kids are learning the types of skills they need to do well on these formative assessments that we're talking about.

There will be kids who are below benchmark levels of performance, for example, who will need extra instruction, and that's the purpose of collecting formative assessment data. They have to be able to go in and provide that instruction for those kids. In some cases, if schools are really struggling, they may have a high percentage of kids who fit that particular profile, lots of kids who are at risk for reading problems. They have to use the data to provide instruction for those kids and it's going to be a challenge, initially, because there'll be many kids who might be in that category. As they provide effective instruction over time, the percentage of kids who are in that at-risk category should go down. It should go down for both English language learners and non-English language learners. Now, there will be more kids initially—English language learners, a higher percentage are likely to be in that at-risk category—but the at-risk designation does not have to be a pejorative term. It does not have to mean that the child should be in special education or should be referred to special education, or any kind of label that might be stigmatizing for the child. All it really needs to indicate is that in terms of reading instruction, students who have some elevated risks of reading problems are provided with differentiated instruction that will help them make progress so that they can catch up to their peers.

I think that schools and districts should start with the idea that they're going to develop a comprehensive assessment approach for their children and that they should include English language learners and non-English language learners in that system. They should develop the system so that they answer very specific purposes for the assessments. And some of those purposes that I think are critical are to screen children for reading problems at the beginning of the year, and to monitor progress frequently on the kinds of measures that we know are important in terms of growth development: areas like phonemic awareness, decoding, and reading fluency. They should look at the relationship between acquisition of those skills and performance on these formative assessment measures, and higher-level skills such as reading comprehension and vocabulary. They should investigate that thoroughly and see that their interpretations about English language learners are, in



fact, true. They should have people in the building who really are knowledgeable about assessment, about the actual procedures that are used in a building. And, for schools that are just starting out on this process, there is a lot to do. It's a logistics nightmare in many ways for many schools as they first start out. There are materials to develop; there are individuals to train who are going to administer these assessments; there are schedules to put out. It's quite complicated. It gets easier over time, but the first year or two, it's a challenge just to put everything in place. Districts and schools should be aware of that challenge and try to plan for it. As they develop expertise, it will get easier, and the easier it gets, the more they will be able to focus on what the data mean.

For some period of time districts and schools have had a tendency to feel good about just collecting the information. And sometimes schools don't move beyond that point. The goal becomes data collection, and that's a significant problem because the data are not used to make instructional decisions about kids. So what I would highly recommend is that schools and districts plan for how they are going to use the data, and they should plan for this from the beginning. They should find people in their building. Usually a building principal and a coach, a reading coach, would consider themselves the two individuals in the building—and there will hopefully be others—who are really knowledgeable about the data and how to interpret the data. They should have some way of displaying the data in a way that teachers and parents, sometimes kids, can understand. They should have graphs and charts that are provided very, very quickly after the formative assessment data is collected. So in other words, if they collect the data in let's say the beginning of the year in September, and they don't get the results until November, that's a problem. They should have a way of collecting the information, organizing it, putting it into a computer, getting graphic displays—and numerical displays, however they want to look at the data—very quickly. They should take those graphic displays and numerical displays to their meetings and decide how they're going to use this information to plan instruction for kids. The data has to lead to good decisions about how to teach kids to read. A good, strong formative assessment system will provide the data, much of the data, that schools and districts need to figure out who those kids are and what kind of instruction those kids should receive.